



CHINESE TALLOWTREE

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THE CHINESE TALLOWTREE (*Sapium sebiferum*) was introduced as an ornamental. Although native to China and Japan, this tree has naturalized in the Southeast from South Carolina to Florida and as far west as Louisiana and Southeast Texas.

This is a moderate-sized tree usually reaching heights of 30 to 40 feet. The leaves usually turn a beautiful red or yellow color in the fall. The fruit is a rounded three-lobed capsule that splits open in the fall revealing three white, waxy-coated seeds. From a distance they resemble—you guessed it—popcorn; thus, the tree has become known by the common name “popcorn tree.”

The sandy soils and warm climate of the coastal plains make an ideal habitat for this fast-growing weed tree. The tallowtree can become readily established on a site and root sprouts usually help it to dominate an area.

This tree has very little, if any, commercial value and can pose a problem if it becomes established, forming thickets. In Florida some extensive eradication



efforts have been tried. When managing your forest for pines, the tallowtree can be controlled with a variety of herbicides. Arsenal and Roundup are two popular herbicides that are effective in controlling tallowtree. However, most of the chemicals that work well on the tallowtree also kill many other primary hardwoods, making control more difficult when managing for hardwoods.

The tallowtree can be an asset or a liability depending on where it sprouts up. It

can be an asset in an urban setting. Its fast growth and colorful leaves are characteristics most people want in an ornamental. The tallowtree is also tolerant of droughts and other extreme conditions. And since it seeds in naturally, you can find it growing in many yards.

When I lived in Pensacola, my mother transplanted a tallowtree sprout, about 4 feet tall at the time, to a sunny space in the yard and began watering and nurturing it. Within three to four years, it had grown approximately 30 feet, providing shade and color to our yard. Every October my family enjoys the brilliant red color of a tallowtree in our front yard in Elmore County.

Tallowtree can also be a liability in an open field or in forestland settings. Because of the poor commercial viability of the tree it becomes a problem, forcing the landowner to consider some type of control measure to recapture the site. And in most cases the sooner the tree is controlled, the better.

So take a look around your neighborhood; chances are, there's one “popping” up near you. 🌳



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